DEISM #3

THE CHURCH'S ANSWER TO DEISM

Prayer
Scripture: Romans 1:18-25
Hymn: 532 "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross"

Deism and the subsequent developments presented to the churches of England a tremendous challenge—a challenge for which the churches were poorly prepared. The fierce intolerance of the Church of England and the fanaticism of the Dissenters made England ready for a reasonable religion. The shortcomings of the churches made the stinging accusations of the Deists credible.

THE CONDITION OF THE CHURCH IN THE DEIST PERIOD

When Deism was rising and spreading religion and morality were at low ebb in England. The Reformation had not succeeded in completely purifying the religious life of the country or of the church. The Church of England only grudgingly granted any tolerance to Dissenters. The Dissenting churches still harbored deep resentments and even much hatred toward the Establishment. Puritan zeal was cooling. Many of the clergy had little intellectual or spiritual interest and often the services of the churches were carried on in dull routine fashion. Often the clergy were ignorant, lazy and inactive and negligent of duty. The clergy were viewed with contempt by the educated upper classes. Scorn for the clergy grew as Deist criticisms mounted. In the Church of England pluralism still existed—high clergy holding a plurality of offices and drawing income from these offices without being in residence or rendering service. The offices were farmed out to very poorly paid lower clergy. There was widespread bitter feeling between higher and lower clergy. For the younger sons of the aristocracy the church was still a way to secure an easy living. Too often the clergy had no sense of the dignity of their office and were boon companions of the squires in their fox-hunting, drinking, card-playing, and partying with their mistresses. Sermons were notoriously dry and dull.

The universities were characterized by cold and unspiritual formalism, indolence, drunkenness and skepticism. Any manifestation of devoutness was apt to draw sneering derision.

Walpole and many of the prominent leaders in political affairs were openly scornful of religion and guilty of unblushing immorality in private life. The leaders in commerce and industry were caught up in profits and had little concern for the welfare of the workers. Among the lower classes lawlessness and vice prevailed to an alarming extent with little restraint. Church attendance declined and almost no new churches were built and almost no new schools.

Deism became fashionable in intellectual circles. As the later Deism began to openly attack the essentials of Christianity skepticism and atheism spread in England. Infidelity became fashionable in high circles. In 1751 Bishop Butler wrote that
religion was no longer considered a subject for inquiry but had come to be considered fictitious. Dean Swift remarked that hardly one in a hundred of the English people of quality or gentry appeared to act by any principle of religion and that the case was not much better with the vulgar.

Church conditions in England were such that the Deists could dare to charge that it was doubtful whether Christianity had resulted in any significant improvement in human living.

From such a picture one might conclude Christianity was in decline. But this was not the full picture. In the churches and universities of England there were still very able and dedicated scholars and preachers. In fact as scholars look back today they see clearly that those who rose to defend Christianity were abler scholars and men of greater dedication than the Deists. The defenders of Deism were no match for them. There were also shallow and incompetent defenders just as there were shallow Deists. But the churches of England—both the Establishment and the Dissenters—contained many dedicated and earnest people. There were good, saintly hard-working clergy who truly cared for their charges and worked very hard. They truly lamented the decline of spirituality in country and church. A host of defenders rose to meet the Deist challenge. The conflict of ideas in England was intense.

THE EXALTATION OF THE CREATOR

There were scholarly men in the Church of England and also among the Dissenters who gloried in Deism's exaltation of reason and nature. They had great respect for Newton and the scientists who unveiled the secrets of the physical universe that revealed the glory of the Creator. They rejoiced in John Locke's exaltation of the reasonableness of Christianity. Even after Deism had turned to skepticism and the mocking of Christianity, men like Bishop Paley exhorted the clergy to find their recreation in the earnest study of science rather than in the empty vanities that had so often discredited churchmen. The Latitudinarians of the Church of England were in the forefront of trying to reconcile the church to the new science and philosophy that was creating a new intellectual environment. They had little patience with the traditional formulations but were ready to welcome a rational religion that could be expressed in simple, non-technical terms and that would find practical expression in good works and good morals rather than in abstract speculation. They exalted the idea that it was wise to be sober and pious because virtue naturally brings its own reward—immediately in this life and with the prospect of an eternal reward.

As Deism became skeptical and critical of Christianity there were many who continued to glory in the argument from design and who in writings and sermons continued to proclaim the glory of the Creator revealed in his creation. John Ray's Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of Creation (1691) continued popular and passed through many editions. Samuel Clarke's Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God (1704-6) was considered a classical answer to skeptics and atheists. The scientist, Robert Boyle (1627-91) left in his will provision for a trust to provide the sum
of fifty pounds a year to provide for a series of eight lectures to be given in some London church against unbelievers.

Clergy and laity alike rose to defend Christianity against the rising skepticism, atheism, infidelity, and attacks on Christian morality. The Deist plea for rationality and common sense was not lost on the church. Churchmen prepared elaborate defenses of the faith but at the heart of the defenses was the common sense answer that something as marvelous as this universe required a rational Creator of great power and goodness. The answer of the church is known as the "Watch-maker Theology." It was a simple, common-sense answer capable of being appreciated by the ordinary citizen: What were the odds that if one threw out a basket of scrap metal that a beautiful watch or clock would spontaneously spring up? What were the chances that one could throw out a bunch of scraps and a beautiful and accurate planetarium would spring up? The heavens are far more marvelous than any planetarium that the human mind could design to depict the glory of God's heavens.

As modern thinkers look back on the struggle between the churches and Deism it is clear that churchmen put themselves under a great disadvantage by granting to the Deists too much. Both the Deists and their opponents were much too optimistic in their estimation of the powers of human reason. Also churchmen were too ready to accept the Deists' claims concerning natural religion without making them give a clear definition of terms.

**JOSEPH BUTLER AND HIS ANALOGY OF RELIGION**

Bishop Joseph Butler's (1692-1752) The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature, was the most complete and thorough, the most formidable and most decisive answer to the Deists. It virtually ended the debate and sealed the doom of Deism. Skirmishing continued but the fundamental issues had been settled. Its arguments were so effective the Deists never attempted a direct refutation of it.

Joseph Butler was born at Wantage, Berkshire, the son of a Presbyterian draper. His father sent him to the dissenting academy at Tewkesbury to study for the Presbyterian ministry. He read Samuel Clarke's "Boyle Lectures" and corresponded with him. He changed to the Church of England and entered Oriel College, Oxford, in 1714. He was ordained in 1718 and from 1718 to 1726 was the preacher at Rolls Chapel. Here he delivered his Fifteen Lectures elaborating on and defending Christian morality which established him as one of the able preachers and defenders of Christianity of the day. He was promoted to the wealthy benefice of Stanhope. Here he worked on his Analogy of Religion which he published in 1736. He was appointed Clerk of the Closet in the service of Queen Caroline. Before her death in 1737 she commended him to King George II who saw that he was promoted to Bishop of Bristol in 1738. In 1740 he became Dean of St. Paul's. In 1750 he became bishop of Durham.

Butler's Analogy has often been praised as one of the greatest works of English theology. He aimed his work against the Deists but seldom mentioned them by name; he battled their basic ideas
rather than their representatives. He carefully considered each of the arguments they had advanced. He did not evade any of the difficulties. He made no unfair claims for his own arguments. With disconcerting clarity he exposed the too easy confidence of the Deists in human reason and in their too easy optimism that they understood all about God's wisdom and purpose. He did not try to prove God's existence since the Deists granted His existence. He did not question that reason is the faculty by which we must judge all things. He challenged the assumption that the religion of nature is clear and free from all ambiguity. Nature is full of perplexities and uncertain probabilities. It is full of unexplained mysteries. The facts of nature fail to provide a basis for assured certainty. Human reason is capable only of probabilities. Revealed religion is filled with analogous obscurities and difficulties. The difficulties in Christianity bear a close analogy with those we encounter in nature. Neither presents more difficulties than the other. What we do not understand in both spheres is due to the lack of knowledge due to the limitations of the human intellect. Both natural religion and revealed religion are beset with analogous difficulties which make human inferences about them merely probable. Both natural and revealed religion can be accepted on the same grounds as from the same Author.

The Analogy is divided into two parts. In Part I Butler discusses natural religion. He defends belief in the immortality of the soul arguing from changes in nature such as the change from "a worm to a fly" and changes in the human body. He discusses the nature of God's government of the world and man's probation connected with rewards and punishment. He argues our ignorance of the whole scheme of Providence and the Divine government of the world.

In Part II he takes up Revealed Religion contending for the necessity of divine revelation and the mediatorial mission of Christ. Christianity is a republication of natural religion. It is a revelation of facts and precepts beyond the reach of man's reasoning powers. It contains a moral system that is a part of God's government of the world. Its supernatural character does not rule out the competence of reason to judge the meaning, the morality and the evidence of Revelation. The evidence may not amount to demonstration but it can establish the probability provided by miracles and prophecy. Conscience is a gift from God. Scripture cannot be used to evade moral imperatives. Any inconsistencies in the Bible are only apparent and not real. Christianity is not a theory but the right course of action.

NATHANIEL LARDNER'S THE CREDIBILITY OF THE GOSPEL HISTORY

Another able defense of Christianity came from the Independent minister, Nathaniel Lardner (1684-1768). He was a native of Hawkhurst in Kent. He had studied in Utrecht and Leyden. He became an Independent minister in 1709. He attempted to reconcile all discrepancies in the Biblical narratives in a large and famous work of fourteen volumes, entitled The Credibility of the Gospel History, published between 1727 and 1757. It contained a large apparatus of footnotes that was a mine of information for scholars. He consulted patristic texts and earlier commentaries, such as those of Hugo
Grotius. He collected materials on the authorship and date of the New Testament books. Deist tracts and pamphlets were no match for such a monumental work.

WILLIAM PALEY'S EVIDENCES OF CHRISTIANITY

The Christian Evidence Movement was the church's answer to the radical skepticism of Hume with his denial of both natural and revealed religion and his attack on miracles. It was also the answer to Mandeville's attack on Christian morality.

One of the most popular defenders of Christianity was William Paley (1748-1805). He was educated at Christ's College, Cambridge, where he became one of the most popular teachers and most sought after lecturers. He published his The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy in 1785. It immediately became one of the most popular textbooks in ethics. In 1790 he published his Horae Paulinae to prove the historicity of the New Testament by a comparison of the accounts of Paul in the Epistles and Acts. It was considered his most original work. In 1794 he published the first edition of his View of the Evidences of Christianity. With great clarity and effectiveness he gathered the best defenders of the faith had to offer in both external and internal evidences. It proved a most durable textbook. This was followed in 1802 by his Natural Theology written to prove the goodness and the existence of God and to complete his system of evidences for the truth of Christianity.

SOME OTHER DEFENDERS OF THE Faith

One of the able defenders against the attacks of Hume was the Scottish theologian, George Campbell (1719-1796). In 1763 as principal of Marischal College he published his Dissertation on Miracles. He sought to show that miracles are capable of proof by testimony, and that the miracles of Christianity are sufficiently attested.

One of the foremost defenders in the continuing battle was Richard Watson (1737-1816) of Cambridge. He first served as Professor of Chemistry and became a Fellow of the Royal Society. Then he became Regius Professor of Divinity. In 1776 he published a reply to Gibbon's attack on Christianity in his Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire—he was one of the few opponents that Gibbon respected. In 1796 his An Apology for the Bible was an answer to the American Deist, Tom Paine.

Another who in the long run greatly damaged the Deist conceptions was the Irish philosopher, George Berkeley (1685-1753). Berkeley was educated in Trinity College, Dublin. He became bishop of Cloyne. He was a man of pure and unselfish character. He dreamed of establishing a school in Bermuda to train missionaries to the Indians. He spent time in Rhode Island preparing for the project. He failed to raise sufficient funds for the project. He is best remembered for his philosophy which made the Deist position untenable. In his philosophy only mind and ideas have real existence. What we call matter is not outside the mind but is within it and is imposed on the mind by the power of God, the eternally
active mind. Matter does not exist and the materialistic conception of the universe is false. He denied the natural religion of the deists and gave a philosophic defense of Christianity.

**A DIFFERENT ANSWER TO THE DEISTS**

In both the Church of England and the Dissenters there were clergy who faithfully discharged their duties, who worked to stir the emotions of the people and to encourage them in practical religion and who felt that the best answer to Deists, skeptics, and atheists was a great spiritual awakening. They had no quarrel with those who tried to give a rational answer in Christian evidences but they felt that both the Deists and their opponents made too much of human reason. They looked to Christian experience for an answer.

One of the early leaders of a spiritual awakening was Bishop Thomas Wilson (1663-1755). As bishop of Sodor and Man, he set himself the task of raising the standards of the spiritual life. To this end he wrote his *Sacra Privata* and other devotional books that enjoyed wide circulation.

One of the most influential and most acute of the antagonists of Deism was William Law (1686-1761). Educated at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, he became a fellow in 1711. He was one of the non-juroring clergy who refused to take the Oath of Allegiance to George I. He was deprived of his fellowship. He became a tutor in the Gibbon where he tutored the father of the historian, Edward Gibbon. He led a life of great simplicity and devotion, giving himself to study of spiritual writings and charity work. He was greatly influenced by the writings of the mystic, Jacob Boehme. He became convinced that a new life is begotten in the soul by an illumination of the spirit. This was the one adequate veritification of the gospel. Justification had a subjective, personal character rather than being a forensic view of imputed righteousness. Christ did not die to quiet an angry God but took on himself our fallen nature to overcome all the evils the fall had entailed. From Christ we receive the power to be born sons of God. The only ones who will be finally lost are those that the infinite love finds incorrigible.

Law saw in the contemporary stage one of the main corrupters of morality. In 1726 he published his *Absolute unlawfulness of the Stage Entertainment*. The same year he published his *On Christian Perfection* as a guide to those who wanted a spiritual life. In 1728 he published his most famous work, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. These works brought many to a spiritual awakening. Many who were horrified at where skepticism and the attacks on Christian faith and morality were leading found comfort and guidance in Law's devotional works. They found the spiritual life the most effective answer to Deism. Dr. Samuel Johnson wrote that the first occasion of his thinking in earnest on religion was on reading at Oxford Law's *Serious Call to a Holy and Devout Life*. Even Edward Gibbon had a certain respect for Law. He declared "If he finds a spark of piety in his reader's mind, he will soon kindle it to a flame."

The earnest and buoyant religious life found expression in the
hymns of the Dissenters, Isaac Watts (1674-1748) and Philip Doddridge (1702-1751). Among the hymns of Watts were: "Oh God Our Help in Ages Past," "Joy to the world, the Lord has come," "When I Survey the wondrous Cross on which the prince of glory died," and "Jesus shall reign where'er the sun doth his successive journeys run." Doddridge contributed such hymns as "O God of Bethel by whose hand thy people still are led," "Awake my soul, stretch every nerve and press with vigour on," and "How gentle God's commands." He also wrote a widely used devotional work, *The Rise and Progress of Religion*.

These hymn writers helped prepare the way for Charles Wesley while Law's works became the seeds that produced the revival led by John Wesley. Wesley himself credited Law with sowing the seeds for the great Evangelical Revival.

It was Wesley's revival and the accompanying revival in the existing churches that was the most powerful and effective answer to the skepticism and atheism that grew out of Deism.